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WANDA SYKES  
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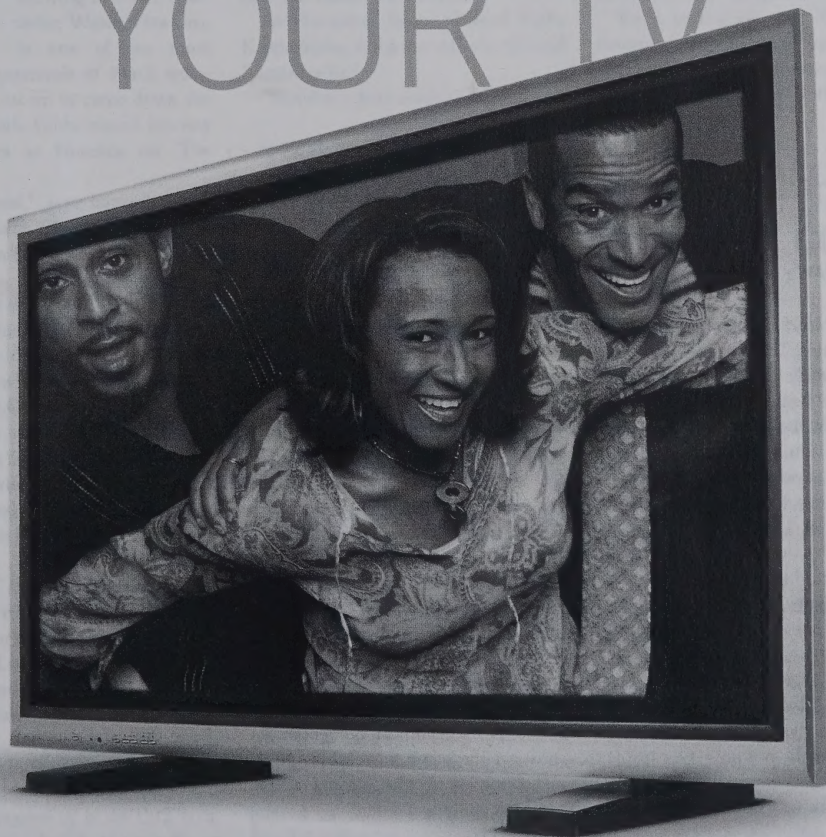
**HOLLYWOOD**—Interviewing Wanda Sykes can be a dangerous experience.

It's not because the Hampton University alum is packing; nor does she have a bad-attitude disorder. It's because at some point, Sykes, 38 is going to say something that makes you laugh so hard that you just might bust a gut and need some medical attention. That's what almost happened to a pack of television critics recently when someone asked her if stardom had changed her. "Uh, I get really good weed now," she cracked. "No seeds, no stems—just really good s\_\_\_\_. It lasts a long time. One, two puffs, I'm good!"

No doubt.



# HOW WANDA SYKES IS TAKING OVER YOUR TV





sykes, star of Fox's "Wanda at Large" is definitely one of the "it" girls in network television these days. Although her show about a standup comic working for a news magazine show in Washington, D.C., has met with mixed reviews, there's no denying that her character, Wanda Hawkins, is one of the most

entertaining portrayals of Black womanhood on a sitcom to come down the pike since Marla Gibbs sassed her way into our lives as Florence on "The Jeffersons."

"It's just real," says comedian and actor Chris Rock, who employed Sykes as a writer on his old HBO show. "It's just Wanda."

In the past five years, Sykes has had ample opportunity to be real and successful. The diminutive Portsmouth, Va., native, who began her standup career in D.C. in 1987, has since worked as a writer on "The Keenan Ivory Wayans Show," won an Emmy in 1999 as a writer for "The Chris Rock Show," worked the room at a party to earn a spot on HBO's "Inside the NFL" and Larry David's "Curb Your Enthusiasm," and is now starring in and producing her own show.

"She's worked hard for it," says "Wanda at Large" co-creator and co-executive producer Bruce Helford. "She's the hardest-working writer and actor I know. Believe me, no one works harder. I don't know where she gets all that energy."

Sykes, who grew up in the D.C. area, was not exactly the life of the party or the class clown during her formative years. But she was always a capable storyteller. Her colorful lies about why her homework was late or why she missed

homeroom did more to amuse her teachers than anger them.

"I got away with a lot just by telling stories," Sykes says.

## OFF TO COLLEGE

After graduating from high school, Sykes enrolled in a local community college. She was soon lured to Hampton by her aunt, Hampton professor Dr. Dolores Sykes, and by the need to be close to an ailing grandmother who lived near the waterfront campus.

At Hampton, Sykes pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha, hung out with the Q's and "partied a lot."

"Partying is part of any college experi-

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**>WANDA SYKES**

ence," she says. "I guess I knew when to leave the party because I did graduate!"

"I chose Hampton because I'd gone to predominantly White schools and I was always like the only Black kid in my class a lot of times. I got tired of being the only Black kid and I wanted to see what it was like going to a school that was predominantly Black. It was cool—very cool."

Her most memorable experience occurred one night when Sykes and her girls had headed into town to score a little libation. On the drive back, the car they were riding in broke down—literally.

"My friend Kelly had this flashy, souped-up car and as soon as we made the turn to get back to campus the car—it just dropped like boom! I looked behind me and I saw a wheel rolling down the road," Sykes says. "The wheel fell off the damn car. Somebody got out to get the damn wheel, but me, I was holding on to the alcohol screaming 'Don't spill the alcohol!'"

Sykes says her experiences at Hampton helped shape her comedy.

"It gave me a different perspective as far as the whole race thing, especially," she says. "I'm sure the perception some people have of a Black College is that Black kids go around saying 'Damn crackers and [bleep] the White man' all day. We didn't even think about it—didn't give a damn. We were very political, but it was a very enlightening experience. And that's what I try to do in my comedy—enlighten."

Sykes took a job with the National Security Agency after graduation. It didn't take long for her to realize that a good government gig with excellent

benefits wasn't her calling and she began hitting the D.C. comedy clubs. Audiences at comedy slams found the little girl with the loud voice rather appealing and Sykes was able to parlay her regional success into some national opportunities with Wayans and Rock.

It was her mouth, however, and not her pen that resulted in her gig on "Inside the NFL."

"I went to a party with a friend mostly because I knew I could drink for free all night and I got to talking s\_\_\_ to Bob Costas and the next thing I knew HBO was calling me to be on the NFL show. I'm a big football fan, so it was like a dream come true."

Although Sykes spends most of her time on the sidelines poking fun at the NFL's best and brightest, she also enjoys strolling through the locker rooms. "Any woman who tells you she ain't looking is lying!" she says. "And with me, I really can't help it. I'm so short that most of those private parts are eye level!"



## HARD WORKER

What's a girl to do? Work even harder.

In addition to her own show and "Inside," Sykes also makes recurring appearances on "Curb Your Enthusiasm" playing herself. An episode she starred in last season, "Krazee Eyez Killa," won an Emmy this year for best direction. Ironically, Sykes was one of the hosts for this year's Emmy Awards.

With all that she's doing, there's precious little time for other pleasures. But apparently that's the way Sykes likes it.

"I'm a workaholic," says the divorcee who has sworn off marriage for life.



(LEFT) Sykes on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno." PHOTO BY KEVIN WINTER/IMAGEDIRECT GETTY IMAGES (CENTER) Sykes on HBO's "Curb Your Enthusiasm." PHOTO COURTESY OF HBO (RIGHT) Sykes on FOX's "Wanda at Large." PHOTO COURTESY OF FOX TV

"When I have down time I like to have dinner with friends over a good bottle of wine and every now and then I'll treat myself to a spa day. I just go somewhere and let somebody touch me. That's my splurge."

Brothers who want to get with Sykes will need to tap into their inner David Blaine. It's gonna take some magic to pin Ms. Sykes down.

"They'll have to add five more hours to each day," she says. "If a man can do that, I'm his."

Sykes' longtime friend Bernie Mac snickers loudly when he hears that last line, mostly because he knows it's true. "Wanda's not trying to deal with any B.S. right now. Anyone who comes her way is gonna have to come correct," he says.

"I've known Wanda for a long time. Wanda knows what she's doing. Wanda

has guts. What I mean by that is that a lot of people do things for P.C. A lot of people do things for quick laughs—insults and things like that. Wanda has a point of view. Not too many comedians today have a point of view. They're microwave. They want that quick fix—that hurry up, that popularity. Comedy needs to have a platform. Wanda Sykes, she has that. And Wanda Sykes is funny. She's been around the best. She knows how to be funny."

Two of the best are Rock and David. "Chris taught me so much especially in standup before I even started working



for him," she says. "When he did 'Bring the Pain,' that just really raised the bar for standup. It was like this is what we're really supposed to be doing. It got comics back into being the social consciousness of the community. 'Larry taught me—which I haven't been able to use yet—to say no. Larry can do that now. He's got millions and millions of dollars. But me, I gotta go 'run that by me again!' For him it's all about integrity."

## COLLABORATION

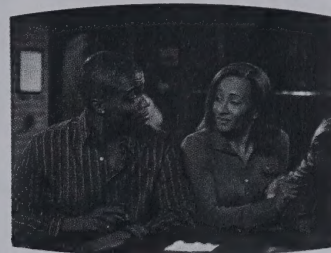
Sykes also credits her collaborator Lance Crouther with making her a better writer. They've worked together since "The Chris Rock Show" and she says she won't make a move without him. Their future plans include writing and producing films and developing television series for other people.

"She's an exceptional joke writer," Crouther says. "It's truly genius and I would say that I've been around comedians all my life and some work hard and some have that natural gift. Wanda is that rare combination."

"The thing with me and her is that we have certain common experiences and those things sort of bonded us. We motivate each other and have the same standards. We both hate B.S."

At the end of the day, however, Sykes simply relies on her own instincts.

"It's easy just to be me," she says. "I guess I'm just lazy. I don't want to



spend all of that energy being somebody else. It's just easier to be me."

And it's easier for Sykes to be herself on stage than it is on censored network television.

"I love my show," says Sykes, who has scaled back her role this season to allow costars Phil Morris, Jurnee Smollett, Dale Godboldo, Ann Magnuson and Robert Bailey Jr. an opportunity to shine.

"But, oh man, I get on stage and it's on. I did like four dates after the show came on this spring, and in D.C. as soon as I hit the stage there was just eruption. People were going crazy, and it felt great to get that kind of response. All of the shows have been selling out. It made my nipples hard actually. It was good—a good feeling. Did you get that? Nipples hard!"

Got it.

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